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ABSTRACT

The language teacher must provide a variety of activities in the classroom in which the student can use the second language in unrehearsed, novel situations requiring, on his part, inventiveness, resourcefulness and self-assurance. There should be less emphasis on linguistic accuracy and more on truly spontaneous and creative language. In the author's experience students who had been given the opportunity for innovative self-expression from the very beginning of their study of French far outperformed students who had not had such an experience in situations requiring spontaneous interaction with a native speaker. This experience also gives a sense of achievement to students, who therefore develop a very positive attitude toward language learning. Role playing, discussion topics and games all represent strategies for providing the emotional involvement necessary for authentic interaction in the classroom. Radio broadcasts from other countries can be incorporated into the language program to provide up-to-date commentary on a variety of topics in language that is fresh and real. A system of "phone pals" can be set up whereby students exchange messages with each other or with native speakers in the community. (Author/CFM)

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Teaching for Communication *

Sandra J. Savignon

Foreign language methodologists concerned with drawing the attention of the profession to the need for practice in spontaneous, meaningful language use in the acquisition of a second language have made the distinction between linguistic competence and communicative competence. Linguistic competence may be defined as the mastery of the sound system and basic structural patterns of a language. It is typically measured by discrete-point or separate measures of achievement in terms of the elements of language: pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. Communicative competence may be defined as the ability to function in a truly communicative setting, that is, in a spontaneous transaction involving one or more other persons. As most experienced teachers will acknowledge, it is one thing to know about a language--verb forms, vocabulary items, basic grammatical patterns, and the like--and quite another to know how to use it effectively in a conversational exchange with a native speaker.

Imagine for a moment a student of French who has been asked out to dinner in a Paris restaurant or, to use an example on this side of the Atlantic, has agreed to serve as an interpreter for a visitor from Rouen. The likelihood that any one of the phrases or expressions from his French I textbook will fit his particular situation is slim, if indeed he can even recall them! His chances of being served what he wants, or of giving the right information to the visitor, are much greater if he has learned strategies to cope with the linguistic disadvantage at which he inevitably finds himself:

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What do I do when I don't understand?

What if I can't think of a word?

How can I overcome my embarrassment at not speaking fluently?

Self-assurance in real-life situations such as these comes not from repetition of patterned phrases but from first, an understanding of what it means to communicate and second, lots of practice in doing so.

The point is, all our students, no matter how long they study a second language, will find themselves eventually in the real world, outside the classroom, to discover they don't know "all" of French, or German, or Spanish, etc. They will have to make do with what they have and summon all their composure to use effectively what they do know. How much better for them, whether they study a language for six years or for six weeks, to have had the opportunity for spontaneous interaction in the classroom, with their teacher's encouragement. How much better to have learned that it is unrealistic to expect to respond in perfectly pronounced patterns to completely understood requests. In any second-language learning there is much starting, stopping, repeating and reflecting. Sounds are mispronounced, patterns are less than exact. What counts is getting the message across.

Most important to the learner's progress in developing communicative competence is a variety of activities in which the student can use the second language in unrehearsed, novel situations requiring, on his part, inventiveness, resourcefulness and a good bit of aplomb. These are the activities which most closely approximate the real world of the second-language learner. They let him see just how well he could get along

if certain situations came up. They let him measure his progress against criteria which he knows to be more real than weekly grammar quizzes or dialog practice. Most important, perhaps, they let him experience for himself both the understandable apprehensions and increasing exhilarations of self-expression in another language. This experience will take him beyond verb forms and vocabulary lists--so easily forgotten as years go by--to more lasting insights into language and language use. With these insights he will better understand the special needs and feelings of all those, in our own society and abroad, who seek to cross linguistic barriers.

You can help your students take the first step toward an understanding of second-language learning and at the same time prepare them for real language activites by discussing with them the subject of communication in a second language. Have them think for a moment about exchanges they may have had with non-native speakers of English. How did they know they were talking to someone who had learned English as a second language? What kinds of "errors" did the person make--pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar? Did these non-standard forms interfere with meaning? Did some interfere more than others? What have been your students' emotional reactions to the non-native speech of persons they have known? Were they impatient at any difficulties they may have had in understanding? Or did they find the differences "quaint"? Or amusing? Have they had different kinds of feelings toward non-native speakers of different ethnic backgrounds? Was this due to the way they spoke or to feelings the students may have toward the ethnic group with which they identify a particular "accent"? Can they think of entertainers and other well known persons who have a

foreign accent? What is the effect? Do they think the accent may be deliberate in some cases for the impression it creates?

Your discussion should then go to a discovery of what is ultimately important in determining the success of an exchange. If they were trying to get some information from a Frenchman who knew only a little English, how would they want him to respond? If he didn't understand their question, would they want him to just stand there and shake his head? Or should he try to repeat, or ask them to repeat? Are there gestures or other forms of non-verbal communication that would be useful in helping them to get their meaning across?

You should then explain that the real-language activities are concerned with just that--with getting meaning across as effectively as they can, using every means at their disposal. They should not be overly concerned with completeness or the mot juste. Curcumlocution is not only permitted, it is desirable if it furthers communication. Gestures will be useful. If they are not sure of a pronunciation, they should go ahead and try it anyway; maybe it will be understood. An English word with a French (Spanish, German, etc.) pronunciation may even get them by--there is after all, le Coca-cola, le tee-shirt, le stéréo! In these real or simulated communicative settings, it is what they say that counts, not how they say it.

"WHAT!" some of you are surely responding to that last sentence, "not be concerned with how they express themselves! Why throughout my own professional preparation, I was always concerned with accuracy and propriety. And I hope to instill the same respect for the French language in my students. How can I permit them to say whatever they want and let it go uncorrected?"

Your reaction is understandable. Most of us who have been in the foreign language classroom within the last twenty years or so, whether as a student, teacher, or both, have learned to place great importance on linguistic accuracy. Beginning on a wide scale in the late 1950's, proponents of the audio-lingual method stressed near-native speed and pronunciation in first-year students through the use of dialog memorization and repetition of patterned responses. The number of phrases introduced was purposely limited wtih, again, the emphasis on accuracy. Above all, teachers were cautioned against moving too quickly lest the material not be "mastered." Under no circumstances were students to be allowed to express themselves in an area in which they had not had previous drilling. Truly spontaneous or creative language use was postponed until the later stages of language learning, typically the third and fourth years of high school study or later.

The intent was that students would reach a degree of familiarity with the materials presented which would then allow them to recombine patterns and vocabulary in a pseudo-communicative context (a sort of role playing modeled after the situation in a sample dialog). In fact, however, most teachers never reached the recombination activities at the end of the unit. Conscious of having to complete a specified number of units by the end of the term, and concerned with student mastery of the basic material, there just did not seem to be time enough. Those teachers who did try to make time for students to use the patterns they had practiced in more authentic, true-to-life situations were in for a surprise. When put on their own, the majority of students simply could not readily use patterns and vocabulary spontaneously and fluently in a novel situation. There was much stumbling and hesitation, sometimes long and very complete

silence. It is no wonder that a good many teachers found dialog recitation to be a more convenient and face saving way to test speaking ability![1]

The expectations created in the minds of both students and teachers by the audio-lingual method in its many variations have been essentially unrealistic. They have led to a good deal of disillusionment and discouragement. Teachers look upon "mistakes" in the speech of their students as a sign of failure, either on their part or their students'. Students are embarrassed or ashamed of their stumbling, anglicized utterances, expecting, rather, to be able to respond in complete sentences with near-native fluency.

Yet in looking back at their own experiences--as they were learning a second language or, subsequently, in front of the classroom--many teachers know that the first attempts to really express one's own ideas in a foreign language are accompanied by lots of false starts, groping for words and outright blunders. It's the same whether you have studied a language for one year or five. Once on your own, it's a whole new ball game. These same teachers may also have noted that it is not always the "best" students who go on to perform well in an unstructured situation. They themselves may feel they know a lot about the language they teach and are very competent to present syntax, pronunciation and vocabulary; but their self-assurance vanishes when confronted in a social situation with a real live native speaker.

In my own experiences with teaching and testing for communicative competence I have found that students who were given the opportunity for innovative self-expression from the very beginning of their study of French far outperformed students who had not had the benefit of such experience

in situations requiring spontaneous interaction with a native speaker. This, in spite of the fact that both groups performed equally well on standardized tests of proficiency in French. The implications of these results are important. First, they suggest that the standardized tests on which we frequently base student grades or determine college placement are not a valid measure of a person's ability to use a foreign language in an authentic transaction. Second, it is apparent that innovative self-expression in which a student is encouraged to use creatively the language he is learning, regardless of errors, in no way decreases his linguistic accuracy.[2]

Of equal interest to foreign language teachers along with student achievement is student attitude. All of us work best and stay longest in activities which give us a sense of accomplishment. The reactions of my beginning students to the opportunity for spontaneous use of French, from short exchanges with a fluent speaker to group discussions on topics of current interest, have been ones of enthusiasm and gratitude. Students frequently mention the confidence gained: " . . . the sessions especially gave me confidence in myself that I really could talk to someone in French;" " . . . I was able to get a better idea of how to express myself with limited vocabulary;" These sessions taught me to say what I wanted to say instead of book conversations."

The comments of other beginning French students <u>not</u> involved in any systematic program to develop communicative skills offer further encouragement. Their reactions to a final examination requiring them to converse spontaneously with a native speaker indicate that these students,

too, would welcome the opportunity to use French creatively throughout the term:

> I thought (the test) was fun, but very challenging. It doesn't seem as though we've had enough practice speaking off the top of our head. Until this evening, I was never forced to say anything except answers to questions or substitute phrases . . . there was no need to search for words . . . they were supplied. I wish we were forced to do this more often. This is what a language should be.
>
> It seems very difficult, but it is the first time I have had the chance to actually express myself in French . . . I feel I have an "A" in French 101, writing, reading and grammar but an "E" /failure/ in actually having a practical knowledge of the language.
>
> If this is an easy test, I just found that I couldn't talk my way out of the airport if I flew to France.

There are a variety of classroom activities which not only encourage but require spontaneous language use in the classroom. Role playing, discussion topics and games all represent strategies for providing the emotional involvement necessary for authentic interaction in the classroom. Not all activities are suited to all students at all times. Some students, the natural actors, will particularly enjoy the role playing. Encourage them to create their own scenarios. (These should be unrehearsed, commedia dell'arte type of sketches, not memorized dialog.) Others will prefer small group discussion where there is no pressure on a particular person to speak at any one time. Try to respect individual differences as much as you can. Let each student find a sense of achievement in whatever kinds of language activities he enjoys most.

As they begin the role playing, games and other activities, many of your students will be naturally shy. Many of them are ill at ease performing extemporaneously in English, let alone in a second language. You can help enormously by 1) not criticizing their efforts, and 2) relating to them in as friendly, authentic a manner as possible. This is

not the time to correct grammar or to ask for complete sentences. Try, just for the moment, to forget you are a language teacher and to listen instead as an interested participant. If you don't understand a statement addressed to you, let the other person know. Ask him to repeat or to explain, if he can. Or you can restate what you thought you understood for his confirmation. Be helpful, be honest, but never hurtful.

Students will want to say things for which they have not yet learned the words. Encourage them to ask you, "Comment dit-on, en français?" The best time for them to learn a new word is when they really want to know it. You are not expected to know every word either, of course. It someone wants to talk about threshing machines, and you have never spent any time on a mechanized farm in a country where the language is spoken, chances are you will have to look it up. If there's no time for that at the moment, call it "threshing machine," and try to describe it so a foreign speaker could understand.

There are lots of words and expressions that you can give your students to help them save face on those numerous occasions when they can't think of a word or need time to collect their thoughts. There may be second-language equivalents of "thing," "watcha ma callit," etc. which can fill in for just about any concrete noun. How do you say . . . , Will you please repeat . . . , I'm sorry, I didn't understand . . . are necessary phrases to have in your repertoire if you are to let a fast-speaking native know just how much he is getting across. Equivalents for let's see . . . , I mean . . ., um . . . and other such expressions serve to keep the conversation going while you pause to get your bearings.

A single gesture sometimes says more than a thousand words. Show your students the typical gestures you know and use them yourself. Handshaking, shoulder shrugging, fist waving and lip pursing all have their place and are fun to learn. Exploit the resources of your community to create the occasion for authentic communications. Perhaps there is a visiting exchange student living nearby. There may be professional people who would enjoy coming to the school to talk with students. You need not be concerned that their accent is unfamiliar or their language too advanced. Let your students handle the situation as best they can. The more authentic the better.

Explore the possibility of small group activities that bring together students from different levels of language study. Many games and discussions are more fun a second and third time with different participants. The more advanced students can serve as resource persons when you are not there; and the satisfaction they will gain from explaining something to someone else is important to their own motivation for continued study.

Don't overlook the contributions technology can make to communication. Local radio programs in the second language exist in some communities. If not in yours, have you thought about using a short-wave radio? More and more schools are successfully incorporating broadcasts from other countries into their programs. They offer up-to-date commentary on a variety of topics in language that is fresh and real. Some teachers with a ham radio operator's license let their students transmit in the language to points around the United States and Canada.[3]

The telephone is a readily accessible means for providing additional occasions for conversation. You might want to set up a system of "phone

pals" whereby students exchange messages with each other or with native speakers in the community. You could conduct a telephone clinic one hour a week in which you answer any questions put to you in the second language including, as an incentive, questions on the content of the next day's quiz.

Learn to relax about your own "errors." Unless you are a native speaker, chances are you make plenty of them. Don't let that keep you from talking spontaneously with your students. You will get better with practice, and, more important, you will be allowing them the practice they need to improve. Don't be afraid to admit it when you don't know a word or a pronunciation. Your frank admission of what you do and don't know will make you that much more credible in the eyes of your students. It will ultimately serve to give your students confidence that they, too, can learn the language.

Use the first five minutes or so of every class period just to talk with your students in the second language about things of interest to them. The things they talk about spontaneously among themselves before the bell rings are a good clue as to what really interests them. If you, too, chat with them in English before the bell, try to continue the same conversation in the second language. This has the advantage of giving you a topic to discuss on which you've already had some warm-up. Ideas have been expressed, differing points of view noted or perhaps an amusing or dramatic anecdote begun.

Use the second language to talk to your students about the things that concern you all in the day to day classroom routine. Discussions of assignments, corrections, class activities and so forth constitute the

most natural opportunity available for authentic communication. Make the most of it.

Finally, do everything you can to get to know your students as individuals, with lives and concerns that extend far beyond the four walls of the language classroom. You might ask them to fill out a 3-by-5 card at the beginning of the term indicating their special interests, any jobs they may hold, musical instruments they play and other talents. This information will give you a headstart in helping to make class activities more meaningful to all of you.

Once you and your students begin to use real-language activities and to understand their value, you will no doubt find contexts which have particular meaning for you, your class and your community. Above all, remember that for it to be real, communication must be a personalized, spontaneous event. It cannot be programmed. Only you can make it happen.

*Paper delivered at the OMLTA/NYSAFLT IV International Conference, Toronto, February 28, 1975, and published in Conference Papers, Robert McConnell and Anthony Papelia, eds., pp. 10-16. This paper modifies slightly my article, "Teaching for Communication," published in Roger Coulombe, J. C. Barré, C. Fostle, N. Poulin, S. J. Savignon, eds., Voix et Visages de la France: Level I, Teachers Edition, Rand McNally and Co., Chicago: 1974, pp. T13-20. Readers interested in applications for French may refer to the real-language activities included in this text. Spanish and German editions with similar applications are forthcoming.

FOOTNOTES

[1]In one recent survey of methods of testing speaking skill at the high school level, 93% of the teachers questioned reported basing their evaluations primarily on the recitation of memorized dialogs. For a complete report, see Theodore B. Kalivoda, "Oral Testing in Secondary Schools," Modern Language Journal, Vol. 54 (May, 1970).

[2]The research referred to on these pages along with the student comments quoted below is described fully in my book, Communicative Competence: An Experiment in Foreign-Language Teaching (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1972). This volume includes a detailed account of the teaching and testing procedures I established as well as a statistical analysis of the results of an experiment I conducted at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign).

[3]For an introduction to the use of radio in the modern language classroom, see Robert J. Nelson and Richard E. Wood, "Radio in Foreign Language Education," a forthcoming publication of ERIC/CAL (Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C.).